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SUBJECT Politics of Central America

TOM BROKAW: On our Special Segment tonight, Brian Ross takes a look at another aspect of the sometimes curious politics of Central America. Tonight, along the border between Honduras and Nicaragua. It is part of the Argentine connection, an attempt by Argentina to win favor with the United States, even while the U.S. is siding with the British in the Falklands war.

Here is Brian's report.

BRIAN ROSS: This is Tegucigalpa, the capital city of Honduras. And these men are Argentine army officers, a colonel and his aide, who along with about 20 other Argentine military men have been in Honduras for almost a year to help run a guerrilla war. Using this city as a base, moving from one secret command post to another in a blue pickup truck, the Argentines have been busy providing money, arms, and military training to groups training here for battle against the Sandinista government across the border in Nicaragua.

Even with the war over the Falkland Islands, the Argentine military men here, led by this colonel, have stayed in Honduras for a mission that seems to be very important to their generals in Buenos Aires: to disrupt or overthrow the leftist government of Nicaragua, a mission the Argentines apparently thought when they came here last year would win them favor in Washington. And American officials have praised the Argentines for their help in fighting communism in Central America.

TRANSLATOR: In August of 1981, the first Argentine people came to...

ROSS: This is one of the men trained by the Argentines,

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a former Nicaraguan soldier who fled to Honduras when the Sandinistas took over. He says several dozen former Nicaraguan officers were sent to Argentina for training and are now back in Honduras commanding guerrilla groups based in Honduras which make raids across the border into Nicaragua.

TRANSLATOR: We have about seven training camps with about 80 people each camp. And we have been operating into Nicaragua with a lot of positive results.

ROSS: All along the long border between Honduras and Nicaragua, in the mountains in the West and in the jungles and the swamps along the Coco River in the east, the Argentines have helped to set up guerrilla bases.

Deep in the push, and under the apparent protection of Honduran army soldiers who were assigned to accompany us, is a training camp used to recruit members of the Indian tribe in this region, the Miskito Indians. Officially, the government of Honduras says there are no such places in Honduras.

The commander of the Indians, Steadman Fagan (?), has made broadcasts on a clandestine radio station set up by the Argentines accusing the Sandinistas of mistreating his tribe and urging Miskito Indians in villages in Honduras and Nicaragua to join the fight against the Sandinistas.

STEADMAN FAGAN: I have to talk the same language that the Sandinista is doing with my people.

ROSS: What is that language?

FAGAN: Bullet.

ROSS: Just off the Coco River, the Sandinistas have set up an army base to protect this region from raids by guerrillas based across the river in Honduras. And soldiers from this base have reportedly destroyed a number of Indian villages, apparently under orders to clear the border area of anyone who might help the guerrillas.

Early one morning, before the Sandinista army patrols usually begin, a group of Indians took us across the river into Nicaragua to the village where they used to live to show us what they say the Sandinistas did. The village was burned to the ground, and most of the people who lived here fled across the river to Honduras.

And people who live around here say in one village after another along the river the Sandinistas have burned and destroyed homes, churches, schools, livestock, and forced more than 30,000

Miskito Indians to leave the border area.

Until a year ago, the jungle along this river separating Nicaragua and Honduras was a peaceful place where the Indians worried about attacks from snakes and wild animals, not soldiers. Now, almost every week there are new reports of fighting.

And 500 miles away, in the capital of Honduras, there are men, men from Argentina who are doing all they can to keep this fighting going.